Salt was Gold to Early Settlers

By: Dale C. Maley
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Today, we often overlook the challenges our ancestors faced before the advent of refrigeration, which made it difficult to keep meat from spoiling. From the time the Pilgrims first landed in 1620 until about the 1860s, when ice started to be used to preserve meat, salt was the primary method of meat preservation. Ice was used from the 1860s until the 1950s, when most Americans began purchasing refrigerators that employed mechanical refrigeration to preserve meat.

In the 1800s, there were at least three different methods of preserving meat using salt. The first method involved rubbing the exterior of the meat with salt and letting it sit. The salt drew the moisture out of the meat, preventing it from decaying. The salted meat was then smoked, allowing it to be stored for six to 12 months before consumption.

The second method involved soaking the meat in a salty brine, allowing the salt to draw the water out of the meat. Then it was smoked and stored. The third method involved packing the meat in layers of salt between the meat and storing it. No smoking was required.

The oceans contain approximately 3.5 percent salt. Native Americans made bowls from clay and allowed the seawater to evaporate, yielding salt. The early settlers on the East Coast of the United States boiled seawater to extract the salt from the oceans.

Millions of years ago, parts of the United States, including Illinois, were covered by oceans. These oceans deposited salt, which later became underground salt deposits. Sometimes, a natural spring would dissolve some of this salt, forming salty springs on the surface. For example, French Lick, Indiana, had springs that emitted salty water and other dissolved minerals. The salt concentration at French Lick was too low to allow for the economic boiling of water and the extraction of salt.

Salt springs with a high enough salt concentration to boil the water and yield salt were discovered by Native Americans in southeastern Illinois, near Shawneetown and Equality. This area is now commonly referred to as the Saline Salt Works. The Native Americans used clay bowls to let the salty water evaporate and yield salt crystals. The spring water at the Saline Salt Works contained between 0.8 and 1.8% salt, or an average of about 1.3% salt (about a third of the salt water concentration in the oceans).

Around 1735, French settlers learned about the Saline Salt Works from the Native Americans and began extracting and boiling the spring water to make salt crystals. In 1763, control of the salt springs passed to the British after the French and Indian War. In 1803, the U.S. Government made a treaty with the Native Americans and took over control of the Saline Salt Works.

In the early 1800s, the Saline Salt Works required 125 to 280 gallons of brine to produce a single bushel (50 pounds) of salt. Large quantities of wood were needed to fuel the fires used for boiling and evaporating the brine into salt crystals. It required a relatively large amount of human labor to cut the firewood and boil the water.

Before the adoption of the first Illinois State Constitution in 1818, enslaved African Americans were used to operate the Saline Salt Works. Many early settlers in Southern Illinois came from slave-owning states, and they favored the continuation of slavery in the Constitution. As a political compromise to get the first Constitution approved in 1818, a special exemption was made to allow the continuation of slavery at the Saline Salt Works for seven more years after the Constitution was approved.

During the first few years that Illinois was a state, the Saline Salt Works generated 33% of the state's revenue. This high dependence on the Saline Salt Works for state income gradually declined as more settlers moved to Illinois.

All the trees within a couple of miles of the Saline Salt Works were cut down for firewood to boil the saltwater. Operators of the salt works began to pump the salt brine from the salt springs over two miles to where there were more trees for firewood. The salt brine was boiled next to the trees. The pipe was made of trees that had a center hole drilled using a drill powered by a water wheel. Some remnants of this wooden pipe still exist today.

The State of Illinois leased the salt works to private individuals for the production of salt. As the 1825 deadline approached for ending slavery at the Saline Salt Works, the owners forced the enslaved people to sign indentured servitude agreements. These long-term agreements essentially continued slavery at the Saline Salt Works until it closed in 1871 with the death of the principal operator.

John Hart Crenshaw was the principal operator of the salt works near Equality, Illinois, who died in 1871. Crenshaw was infamous for practicing the Reverse Underground Railroad—the kidnapping and illegal sale of free Black individuals from free states into slavery in the South. Despite Illinois being a free state, Crenshaw leased and later owned salt works where the use of enslaved labor was permitted, and he became notorious for his role in kidnapping and slave trading. Crenshaw died on December 4, 1871, and is buried in Hickory Hill Cemetery near Equality, Illinois.

West Virginia also had salt springs with a relatively high concentration of salt. These springs eventually replaced the production of salt at the Saline Salt Works.
Originally, Congress deeded control of the salt land to Illinois at statehood in 1818, forbidding its sale but allowing leasing. After salt production ended and the economics changed, Congress eventually authorized the state to sell the land outright.

Today, the Illinois Salines site is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is managed as an archaeological and historic site by state agencies. The Crenshaw House

(also known as the Old Slave House), located nearby and associated with the salt works, is owned by the State of Illinois. The state purchased the house and surrounding acreage in 2000.

The Crenshaw House (also known as the Old Slave House) near Equality, Illinois, is currently closed to the public and not open for visits or tours. The State of Illinois purchased the property and 10 surrounding acres in 2000. The house has remained shuttered due to the high estimated cost—around $7 million—needed for renovations, repairs, road and parking improvements, and other infrastructure to reopen it as a museum or historic site safely.

The first settlers in Livingston County were Valentine and Rachel Darnall, who settled on Indian Creek south of Fairbury in 1830. In 1832, the McDowells settled north of Fairbury, and Franklin Oliver settled three miles south of Chatsworth in Oliver's Grove. All of these early settlers needed salt to preserve their meat, and this salt came from the Saline Salt Works.

These early Livingston County settlers were likely aware of the Saline Salt Works in southern Illinois. They probably did not know the salt was manufactured using formerly enslaved Black people who had been forced into indentured servitude.

The Crenshaw House still stands near Equality, Illinois. The State of Illinois purchased the historic home in 2000, but it has not been restored and is closed to the public because the State can not afford the $7 million required to rebuild the site.